

Looking Farther Afield

Pasta Source

Julie Ross, Senior Editor

Remember that story about Marco Polo bringing noodles back from China to Italy? (The spaghetti-tree stories should not be brought to mind.) There is good evidence that noodles have been around as a staple for at least 2,000 years: Hou (1) notes that they were known in the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD); Greco (2) cites some evidence to suggest that lasagna has been known since Greek, or at least Roman, times. There has thus been dispute about country of origin.

There is also debate about the relationship of Asian noodles to Italian pasta: The former are usually cut into strips from a flat sheet of dough, the latter are often produced mechanically by extrusion through a die; the former are made of soft wheat, the latter are from durum; the former are cooked in soups, the latter are eaten relatively dry. Nonetheless, both noodles and pasta depend for their integrity on the gluten matrix that develops in a dough made from flour and water.

A recent paper in *Nature* does two things. First, it pushes back the origin of pasta to at least 4,000 years ago (late Neolithic). Second, it strengthens the claim of China as the home of the noodle. Lu et al. (3) discovered noodles in a sealed earthenware bowl at the archeologic site of Lajia in northwestern China. The grain of origin (identified by seed husk and starch granule characteristics) is millet. A combination of a large earthquake and catastrophic flooding may have been responsible for the preservation.

Thus, noodles are likely, indeed, to be from China. How pasta found its way to Europe is still a mystery.—John D. Potter

References

1. Hou G. Oriental noodles. *Adv Food Nutr Res* 2001;43:140–93.
2. Greco L. Mediterranean diet in Italy: historical and socioeconomic perspective. *Nutr Metab Cardiovasc Dis* 1991;1:144–7.
3. Lu H, Yang X, Ye M, et al. Millet noodles in late neolithic China. *Nature* 2005;437:967–8.